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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEAGEA PROPOSES REVAMPING GOVERNMENT WITH
CHRISTIAN MINISTERS

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea conveyed his thoughts to the Charge on the political impasse shortly before departing on his three-week trip to the U.S. He believes Lebanon should boycott the March 29-30 Arab League summit in Damascus if no president is elected. At a minimum, the summit should be held outside of Syria. On the electoral law -- one of the obstacles to reaching an agreement on the Arab League initiative -- Geagea pressed for proportional representation, explaining that such a system would benefit the March 14 Christians and weaken both Hizballah strongholds and Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun's bloc.

2. (C) Proposing that March 14 enlarge its reach, Geagea said he wanted to join forces with non-Hizballah Shia, and in particular, Ahmad Assad, leader of Lebanon Intimaa ("Belonging"), an anti-Hizballah "third way Shia" political movement. Geagea is still proposing to elect a president with a half plus one majority, but, acknowledging the proposal's lack of support, he advocated revamping Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government by replacing current ministers in key positions with Christians. End summary.

3. (C) The Charge, accompanied by PolOff, met with Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea on March 4, days before he departs on a three-week trip to the U.S. Geagea advisors Elie Khoury and Joseph Nehme attended the meeting.

BOYCOTT THE ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT

4. (C) Geagea opposed what he believes is Saudi Arabia's current position on attendance at the March 29-30 Arab League summit in Damascus: Saudi Arabia will attend if Syria invites Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government. Instead, Geagea wants Lebanon and Saudi Arabia to condition attendance on the election of a president in Lebanon, a position he believes Druze leader Walid Jumblatt (with whom, we note, Geagea is often at odds) would support. At a minimum, Geagea wants the summit to be held outside of Syria, as an

extraordinary summit, so that it is not under Syrian leadership. Geagea believes that Siniora would accept the invitation if extended. However, he questions whether Syria would invite only Siniora, who is Sunni, suspecting that Damascus would include Shia Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, in order to avoid giving the impression that Syria recognizes the Siniora government.

MARCH 14 REJECTS MOUSSA'S LATEST IDEA

¶5. (C) Geagea reported that it was not clear whether Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa would return to Beirut this week. He explained that Moussa's latest proposal to majority leader Saad Hariri was to elect a president, then form a national unity government in which the prime minister is not from March 14, an idea which March 14 promptly rejected.

PRESSING FOR PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

¶6. (C) Revisiting Moussa's most recent attempt at negotiations, Geagea said electoral reform remains an obstacle, even within March 14. Geagea is calling for proportional representation, a system he argues would advantage March 14 Christians and break Hizballah strongholds. Moreover, he added, proportional representation would divide Free Patriotic Movement Michel Aoun's opposition bloc by at least 50 percent. Another advantage could be the election of March 14 Shia MPs, he posited. However, he acknowledged, some of Saad Hariri's MPs may lose and Jumblatt would need convincing, and requested that the U.S. urge them to support proportional representation. (Note: Berri told Charge in their February 25 meeting that he favored proportional representation, although he advocated one large electoral district, whereas Geagea favors small districts.

End note.)

ALLYING WITH NON-HIZBALLAH SHIA

¶7. (C) Charge, having just met earlier in the day with Ahmad Assad (septel), leader of Lebanon Intimaa ("Belonging"), an anti-Hizballah political movement, inquired about Geagea's relationship with him. Geagea responded that he has good relations with Assad (who also supports proportional representation, he noted) and that he was interested in bringing him into the March 14 alliance. Claiming that Assad is best positioned to lead a large Shia coalition, Geagea sees potential in Assad but remarked that he needed funding. He cautioned that Saad is opposed to Assad, in part because the Saudis (Saad's allies) do not want to be at loggerheads with Hizballah. Therefore, Geagea concluded, any U.S. support for Assad should be kept quiet. According to Geagea, when Assad ran for parliament as an independent, he received 15-20 percent of the votes cast in his district. (Note: we are skeptical; our information is that he received far fewer. End note.)

¶8. (C) Other potential Shia include Labor Minister Trad Hamadeh's family and independent journalist Okab Saqr. That was the extent of the possibilities, claimed Geagea. Geagea said the U.S. aid to southern Lebanon was not successful at shifting residents' allegiance away from Hizballah, and therefore U.S. aid should go to Assad, in the south, as well as to Christians in the north.

REVAMP THE GOVERNMENT WITH CHRISTIAN MINISTERS

¶9. (C) Looking at the political impasse today, Geagea sees three scenarios: 1) Status quo continues; 2) March 14 elect a president with a half plus one majority; or 3) Revamp the cabinet by placing Christians into key ministerial posts. Geagea, still supporting the half plus one option, recognizes

that it is a risky move that lacks the necessary support at this time. He suggested revamping the cabinet and putting three representative Christians into important ministerial posts such as Interior, Education, and Economy. As some of these slots are currently filled by technocrats, Geagea argued that since Lebanon is not really doing much as a government these days, it does not need technical skills, but rather symbolically important Christian representation. "Now it is seen as a Hariri government; we want it to be seen as a March 14 government," Geagea explained.

USS COLE: THE U.S. IS IN A BIND

¶10. (C) "You put yourself in big trouble," warned Geagea referring to the presence of the USS Cole off Lebanon's coast. He reasoned that if someone were to try something, the U.S. will look bad if it does not react. Conversely, he said, if the U.S. reacts, he is reminded of 1983. The U.S. cannot sit idle, nor can it retreat at this point. He suggested the U.S. could be more supportive if it imposed a travel embargo on Syria, preventing all airlines from flying in and out of Syria. Geagea opined that the Europeans would be more amenable to an embargo after Imad Mugniyeh's assassination, which provided the smoking gun to the world that Syria harbors terrorists.

¶11. (S/NF) Geagea also provided the Charge with unconfirmed intelligence describing an Iranian delivery to Syria of 15 submarines. Information was passed to DAO.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) We were surprised to hear about what appears to be Geagea's relatively developed relationship with Assad and to spot a copy of "The Shia Revival" by Vali Nasr on his desk. Geagea and Berri's shared preference for proportional representation is also interesting. End comment.

SISON